DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 176 UD 033 995

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TITLE	Making Ends Meet: Private Food Assistance and the Working Poor. Discussion Paper No. 1222-01.
INSTITUTION	Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Inst. for Research on Poverty.
PUB DATE	2001-01-00
NOTE	28p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Children; *Hunger; *Low Income Groups; *Poverty
IDENTIFIERS	*Food Assistance Programs; Food Banks; Food Stamp Program; Virginia

ABSTRACT

This study examined characteristics of employed households dependent upon private nutrition programs to help make ends meet. Data were derived from an ongoing study of households receiving food assistance from Virginia food pantries and soup kitchens. In 1997, researchers produced a list of all food pantries and soup kitchens in one region and contacted a randomly selected sample of program participants. The 1997 sites were contacted again in subsequent years. Respondents at each site completed a brief interview that asked about: total number in the household; number of children; respondent's age; age of youngest child; single parent status; educational level; citizenship; race/ethnicity; employment status; receipt of food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; and recent loss of public benefits and other hardships during the past 6 months. Over one-third of respondents were currently employed, and a large percentage had demographic characteristics that did not bode well for their ability to earn high enough wages to meet basic family needs without assistance (less than a high school education, single parent status, female gender, and low wages). Results showed low participation in the Food Stamp Program, even among people who may have been eligible. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Institute for Research on Poverty
Discussion Paper no. 1222-01

Making Ends Meet: Private Food Assistance and the Working Poor

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January 2001

The authors thank the food banks and individuals who helped to coordinate the task of conducting the surveys in their region. We also thank Dr. Marilyn Biggerstaff for her ongoing assistance and consultation.

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Abstract

Concern is growing that large segments of low-income Americans are slipping through, or are not adequately served by, the public food assistance safety net. Many of these individuals are turning to the private network of food pantries and soup kitchens for their nourishment. In particular, a significant percentage of individuals seeking private food assistance are the working poor. In this paper, we look at the characteristics of a sample of employed Virginia households who depend on soup kitchens or food pantries to help them make ends meet. Our data indicate that these individuals have demographic characteristics that do not bode well for their being able to earn high enough wages to all allow them to meet basic family needs without some type of additional supports.

Making Ends Meet: Private Food Assistance and the Working Poor

In 1999, 10.1 percent of the U.S. population, or 10 million households, were identified as food insecure, meaning that these households lacked a nutritionally adequate food supply.[1] Of the 31 million persons in food-insecure households, 12 million were children under 18 years old. However, these numbers alone do not account for the complexity of the problem, as food insecurity varies considerably by household type. Almost 37 percent of poor households were food insecure in 1999, as were 30 percent of single-mother households and 21 percent of black and Hispanic households (Andrews et al., 2000). Another study using the 1997 National Survey of American Families (NSAF) found that almost one-quarter of the nonelderly reported living in a family that experienced problems meeting its food needs (Staveteig and Wigton, 2000).

Currently the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) operates 14 public food assistance programs to address various aspects of food insecurity. The Food Stamp Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are the cornerstone programs. These programs have been shown to be effective in improving the purchasing power and nutritional status of targeted populations (American Dietetic Association, 1998), but a large segment of low-income Americans may be slipping through, or not adequately served by, this public safety net. Many of these individuals are turning to the private network of hunger relief programs, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, for their nourishment. In particular, a significant percentage of individuals seeking private food assistance are the working poor (Rivera, 1997). A recent national study of food pantry and soup kitchen sites found that in more than a third (38.6

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[1]The measurement of food security is based on responses to a series of questions about a household's ability to meet its food needs. Included are such questions as "We worried about whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more" and "In the last 12 months were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because you couldn't afford enough food?" For a full description of the food security measure, see Hamilton et al., 1997.

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percent) of food emergency client households, at least one member was employed (Second Harvest, 1998).

Given the latest round of welfare reforms that emphasize diversion of people from welfare programs and rapid movement of individuals from welfare to work, it is not surprising that working families are struggling to put food on their tables. A growing body of research literature reports numerous barriers to economic self-sufficiency through employment that are faced by many welfare recipients (Sweeney, 2000). Relative lack of education, skills, and job experience affect welfare recipients' ability to get and keep a job, as well as the level of wages and benefits available to them when they are employed. However, it isn't just welfare reform that is potentially putting individuals and families at risk for hunger. Even with a robust economy, many jobs pay wages too low to meet basic needs. Although continuing low unemployment and increases in the minimum wage in the 1990s have helped to raise the incomes of low-wage workers, it has not been enough to compensate for a 20-year pattern of stagnant or declining wages at the low end of the wage scale (Bernstein et al., 2000). For example, as of 1999, the minimum wage still remained 19 percent below its inflation-adjusted 1979 level (Bernstein, Hartmann, and Schmitt, 1999).

A recent study of working-poor families with children found that "in 1996, over 2.7 million children (19 percent of all poor children) lived in families with incomes below the official poverty threshold, although the head of the household worked full-time, full-year" (Wertheimer, 1999, p. 1). And, in 1998, the number of full-time, full-year workers with incomes below the poverty level increased by over 450,000 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1999).

In this paper, we look at the characteristics of employed households that depend on private nutrition programs to help them make ends meet. We use data from an ongoing study of households receiving food assistance from food pantries and soup kitchens in Virginia. Descriptive demographic and employment information is presented in an exploratory effort to assess the reasons such families are

seeking private food assistance, the economic risks and hardships they experience, and the potential for longer-term dependence on what has historically been a strategy to respond to a household's *emergency*, short-term need for food.

To place this discussion in context, the paper begins with background information on public and private food assistance programs that are in place to address the problem of hunger and food insecurity.

FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Public Programs

The USDA's Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the largest and best known of the federal nutrition programs, and an important food resource for poor workers and their families. In general, food stamps are designed to increase the food purchasing power of low-income households. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 tightened the FSP's eligibility rules—particularly for able-bodied adults who are not working—but generally benefits are available to almost all households meeting the federal income eligibility tests for limited monthly income, monetary assets, and value of vehicle(s) owned by the household, as long as certain household members fulfill work requirements or education and training mandates.

Along with the strong economy and the drop in poverty rates, the number of people receiving food stamps decreased in recent years. Data reported by the USDA from fiscal year 1997 indicate that on average, about 22.9 million people living in 9.5 million households received food stamps each month in FY 1997, and in 1999 an average of 18.2 million people were served each month (Wilde et al., 2000). Some evidence suggests, however, that the decline in food stamp participation is not an accurate indicator of the extent of need or eligibility for these benefits. Recent estimates show that the decline in the number of food stamp recipients *exceeds* the decline in the number of people potentially eligible for food stamps. Between 1995 and 1997, the drop in the number of people receiving food stamps was five

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times greater than the drop in the number of people in poverty (Parrott and Dean, 1999). Parrott and Dean also report that the most recent data on food stamp participation among low-income working households with children showed that only 55.2 percent of food stamp-eligible households with earnings participated in the FSP.

Another study of household food stamp participation rates found that 55 percent of the FSP change from 1994 to 1998 was due to a decline in participation by households below 130 percent of the poverty line (Wilde et al., 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that the most recent data on food security show an increase between 1995 and 1999 in the percentage of low-income households that were food insecure. In 1995, 29.1 percent of households below 130 percent of poverty were measured as food insecure (Bickel, Carlson, and Nord, 1999), whereas by 1999 that percentage had increased to just over 32 percent (Andrews et al., 2000).

Although questions have been raised about the accuracy of estimating potential food stamp eligibility using only data on reported annual income (Daponte, Sanders, and Taylor, 1998), there is agreement that the FSP does not reach all eligible families. Even among those households that receive food stamps, many recipients report that the stamps run out before the end of the month (Eisinger, 1998). Those who struggle to make ends meet may find themselves at local food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens in an effort to feed themselves and their families. In fact, a national survey of food pantries and soup kitchen clients found that over 40 percent of households that use private food assistance were also receiving food stamps (Second Harvest, 1998).

Private Programs

The two major private food assistance programs are *food pantries*, which distribute free food and grocery items to individuals and families, and *soup kitchens*, which provide meals prepared on site for individuals and families. Both programs are locally operated by sectarian and nonsectarian charities and groups of concerned citizens. Food and funds for operating costs come from several sources, including

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donations from individuals and groups, as well as public monies and surplus food through the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Almost all of these sites receive a portion of their food items from local or regional *food banks*. These food banks are nonprofit, community-based warehouses that solicit, store, and distribute food from local producers, retail food sources, the federal commodity distribution program, and the food industry.

Typically referred to as emergency food relief (EFR) programs, private food assistance programs have provided food assistance at the local level for over 200 years. Most were established as temporary stopgap measures in times of economic hardship, and once the crisis abated, they closed their doors until the next economic downturn. This 200-year-old cyclical trend, however, appears to be changing, with many privately sponsored "emergency" programs becoming an integral component of the ongoing food assistance network in virtually every locale.

Though precise numbers are not available, Second Harvest, one of the largest private food distribution organizations, estimates that it had a network of 200 regional food banks, providing food to over 46,000 agencies operating more than 94,000 local food programs, in the late 1990s (Second Harvest, 1998). Determining the numbers of individuals who seek assistance at EFR programs is even more difficult. The 1995 Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey's annual survey found that 3.5 percent of all surveyed *households* reported receiving emergency food from a church, food pantry, food bank, or soup kitchen within the previous 12 months (Hamilton et al., 1997a, p. 63). This represents approximately 12 million people who turned to one of these sites to help feed themselves and their families. Second Harvest's estimate of those seeking assistance at its sites in 1997 is even more dramatic. Its network of providers reported serving over 21 million (unduplicated) individuals at pantries, kitchens, and shelters (Second Harvest, 1998). The substantial differences in these estimates may in part be a function of rising numbers of individuals seeking assistance at these sites in recent years. Eisinger

(2000) notes in his survey of Detroit pantries that nearly two-thirds of providers reported an increase in the numbers of clients served in the year prior to his 1999 survey.

Although determining the numbers of EFR clients is problematic, there seems to be no dispute that private food assistance programs fill an important need—and what appears to be a growing need—in local communities. In addition, there is some evidence that significant numbers of the households seeking assistance from food pantries and soup kitchens across the country have a member who is employed. As noted earlier, almost 40 percent of the households who sought assistance from one of the Second Harvest food sites in 1997 had a member who was employed (Second Harvest, 1998). In this study we examine a sample of Virginia private food assistance households to increase our understanding of the economic risks and hardships of this vulnerable group.

THE RESEARCH

Method

For this study we used cross-sectional data that had been collected annually since 1997 from program participants in randomly selected food pantry and soup kitchen sites affiliated with one of the seven Virginia food bank regions. Multistage cluster sampling was performed to select a sample of sites and then a sample of clients at each site. The first stage of sampling involved the seven regional food banks producing an enumerated list of all food pantries and soup kitchens in their regions in 1997 (N = 2,000). Next, a stratified random sample of medium to large food pantries and soup kitchens (defined as those which generally serve a minimum of 15 clients during each food distribution period) was taken within each of the seven regional food bank areas of the state. The researchers randomly selected nine of the medium to large food pantries and one soup kitchen in each of the seven regional areas. This ratio of pantries to soup kitchens is based on food bank directors' estimates that approximately 90 percent or more of the total population served goes to food pantries and the remaining

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10 percent goes to soup kitchens. Additional food pantries and soup kitchens in each region were randomly selected as replacement sites in the event that a site closed prior to data collection or refused to participate when initially contacted. The 1997 sites were contacted again in subsequent years, with randomly selected replacement sites being included as needed for those that had closed or were unwilling to participate.

A two-page fixed-response interview served as the data collection instrument for participants selected at each food site. Information, such as names or addresses, that could expose individual-specific responses was not available to the researchers, assuring participant anonymity. The survey asked participants for descriptive information about the total number in the household, number of children under age 18, respondent's age, age of youngest child, and single-parent status. Descriptive information also included the participant's educational level, citizenship, and racial or ethnic identification, as well as information on the participant's employment status (held a job; usual hours of work per week; typical hourly salary) within the past 6 months and at the time of the survey. Employment status items were expanded in the 1998 and 1999 surveys to include questions about the employment of the spouse or other adult in the household and the disability status of the participant. Survey participants also responded to a series of items addressing receipt of food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), as well as about recent loss of public benefits and other hardships they may have experienced in the previous 6 months.

The regional food bank directors were asked to coordinate with the selected sites in their region to administer the survey to 15 individuals who came to the site during one day in November or December. They were asked collect data on only one day to preclude the possibility of interviewing the same recipient more than once. The food bank director was provided with enough surveys for the ten sites in his/her region, along with detailed instruction sheets for administering the survey. The instructions specified that larger sites were to randomly select individuals at regular intervals (e.g., every

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fifth person), and the smaller sites were to select respondents as they walked into the site until 15 surveys were completed or the site closed for the day. Staff from the regional food banks or staff from the selected sites administered the surveys. Although all food bank regions initially agreed to participate in the study, each year there were staffing issues in some of the food banks and/or local sites that resulted in nonresponse from a site or a limited number of completed surveys in some of the sites. In 1997, 55 sites responded, submitting a total of 764 usable surveys. In 1998, 50 sites responded, submitting a total of 736 surveys, and in 1999, 55 sites responded with a total of 681 surveys, resulting in a total sample size of 2,181 respondents for the 3 years of data collection. It is possible that some of our 1997 or 1998 respondents were interviewed again in a later year, but national data (Second Harvest, 1998) indicate that the likelihood of a respondent being at one of the pantries or soup kitchens on our day of data collection in a subsequent year is quite remote.[2]

Although our sample is restricted to respondents in the state of Virginia, an examination of characteristics of the 1997 Virginia sample and those available from Second Harvest's 1997 national study of food assistance sites (1998) provides some comparative information. These data, presented in Table 1, indicate that overall there are not large differences in the characteristics of the two samples. The most notable differences are in the percentage of African Americans, Latinos, and elderly, with the Virginia sample having a substantially greater percentage of African Americans than the Second Harvest sample (43.7 percent versus 31 percent) and fewer Latino (2.2 percent versus 16.0 percent) and elderly (7.2 percent versus 14.7 percent) sample members. The larger percentage of elderly individuals in the national sample probably accounts for some of the difference in the percentage of single-parent

[2]Second Harvest (1998) data indicate that over 67 percent of its sample had received food assistance from a pantry or soup kitchen for less than 12 months. To the extent that recipients in Virginia fit this trend, less than 33 percent of the respondents would have been receiving food assistance in a previous year. In addition, our data indicate that almost 75 percent of our respondents had been to the food assistance site two or fewer times in the previous month. This does not rule out the possibility that some sample respondents were interviewed in both years, but we believe the numbers would be very small and their responses would not unduly influence the findings of our study.

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TABLE 1
Characteristics of Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Users in Virginia and the U.S., 1997

Characteristic	1997 Virginia Sample n = 764	Second Harvest Client Data n = 23,492
Female respondents	70.4%	63.5%
Percentage of all households in sample that are single-parent households	32.5	24.1
Percentage of all households with children that are single-parent households	57.4	52.6
Education		
Less than high school	47.2	40.0
High school	37.2	35.6
Greater than high school	15.6	24.4
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	43.7	31
White, non-Hispanic	48.3	47
Hispanic/Latino	2.2	16
Respondents over age 65	7.2	14.7
Respondents employed	28.5	20.4
HH with an employed member[a]	35.3	38.6
HH receiving food stamps	37.0	40.7

[a]The Virginia household employment data are from the 1998 sample because respondents were not asked about other employed household members in 1997.

households and employed respondents between the two samples. Differences between the samples on these characteristics are much less striking when considering the percentage of households *with children* that are single-parent (57.4 percent in Virginia versus 52.6 percent in the national sample) and the percentage of households with *at least one* employed member (35.3 percent versus 38.6 percent). These data suggest that the Virginia sample is not substantively different from food pantry and soup kitchen clients in other states.

FINDINGS

It is easy to understand the reliance on food programs for the unemployed. However, given the robust economy and the emphasis on economic self-sufficiency through employment, it is of particular concern that over one-third of emergency food assistance households in both the Virginia and Second Harvest samples were currently employed. The analysis for this paper involves a subsample of "employed or employable" respondents from the 1998 and 1999 Virginia food pantry and soup kitchen surveys. (The 1997 respondents were excluded because detailed household employment questions were not asked during that year.) Respondents were considered employed or employable if at the time of the survey they were between 18 and 65 years old and indicated that they were not disabled[1] (n = 976, or 68.9 percent of the 1,417 respondents in 1998 and 1999). The survey asked the respondents if they were currently employed or unemployed. If unemployed, they were asked if they had been employed during the past 6 months ("recently unemployed") or unemployed for more than 6 months. Among the employed or employable respondents, 61.6 percent were employed at some point within the last 6 months (n = 571

[1]Our identification of "disabled" individuals is likely to be an underestimate of those who are, in fact, too disabled to work. This is for two reasons. First, we only asked about disability status in the 1998 and 1999 surveys, so we are unable to identify persons with disabilities among the 1997 respondents. Second, we use a conservative measure of disability status. Specifically, we only count as disabled those who responded that they were receiving disability benefits.

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of 927 respondents with nonmissing data on these variables). Of those 571 respondents, just over 42 percent (n = 242) were not working on the day of the interview.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Table 2 presents demographic characteristics of the sample across the three categories of employment status. We were particularly interested in knowing how those who were not currently employed, but who had been employed in the last 6 months, compared to those in each of the other two categories. The recently unemployed are at risk of moving into long-term unemployment, but they also have the potential for being re-employed. As can be seen, those who were employed within the last 6 months had a significantly smaller percentage of female respondents in the overall sample (62 percent versus 71 and 72 percent in each of the other groups), but on almost all other household demographic characteristics there were no significant differences between those recently unemployed and those currently employed or long-term unemployed. There are, however, significant differences between those recently unemployed and the other groups in the education and race of the respondents.

Education is a particularly critical factor for future employment. The currently employed respondents have the highest levels of education, with 70 percent having a high school education or above. Among the long-term unemployed only 43 percent have completed high school, whereas the recently unemployed fall between the two groups, with 51 percent in this educational category. This suggests that those more recently unemployed are likely to have better prospects than the long-term unemployed for re-entering the workforce. However, in all three groups large percentages of individuals do not have a high school education, which puts them at continuing economic risk. In addition, African Americans make up a larger percentage of the recently unemployed than of either the currently employed or the longer-term unemployed.

There are also some differences in other sources of income for the three groups of households. Households in which the respondent is unemployed (either recently or longer-term) are significantly less

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TABLE 2
Comparison of 1998 and 1999 Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Respondents in Virginia by Employment Status

Characteristics	Currently Employed n = 329	Recently Unemployed[a] n = 242	Unemployed over 6 Months n = 356
Female respondents	71%*	62%	72%*
Number in household	3.5	3.3	3.4
Households with children <18	69.5%	64.9%	61.2%
# children <18	2.5 (SD = 1.5)	2.4 (SD = 1.3)	2.6 (SD = 1.6)
Age of youngest child	6.8 (SD = 4.4)	7.0 (SD = 4.8)	6.0 (SD = 4.9)
Single-parent household	63%	58%	56%
Education			
Less than high school	30%**	49%	57%*
High school or greater	70%	51%	43%
Race/Ethnicity			
African American	44.1%	49.6%	40.7%*
White, non-Hispanic	41.9%	38.4%	48.6%*
Other	14.0%	12.0%	10.7%
% with another current wage earner	21%*	14%	15%
% with another recently unemployed wage earner	8%	11%	8%
% currently on food stamps	22%*	30%	43%**
% currently on TANF	7.6%	9.0%	12%

[a]Recently unemployed are those respondents who had been employed within the last 6 months.

*p <.05 (significantly different from *recently unemployed*).
**p <.01 (significantly different from *recently unemployed*).

likely to have a second wage earner than when the respondent is currently employed. The likelihood of being on food stamps also varies among the three groups, with those recently unemployed more likely than the currently employed to be receiving food stamps, but less likely than the longer-term unemployed. There are no statistically significant differences among the three groups in the likelihood of being on TANF.

Employment Patterns and Wages. Examining the employment pattern that generates available income provides some indication of why these individuals are seeking food assistance. Questions on hours of work and wages earned were asked of all respondents who were currently employed or recently unemployed. Although over one-third of all respondents (n = 329, 35.5 percent) were employed at the time of the study, some of the employed were at risk because they earned at or below the minimum wage or did not work full time.

The data in Table 3 indicate that over 63 percent (n = 202) of currently employed respondents who reported hours and earnings were working fewer than 40 hours a week, and almost one-quarter (23.6 percent) were earning at or below the minimum wage of $5.15 per hour. The same data for those who were recently unemployed show that 61.9 percent worked fewer than 40 hours a week and 32.7 percent worked at or below the minimum wage. So even when they were employed, earnings for many were extremely low and may indicate a need for continuing reliance on food assistance even if they again obtain a job.

Approximately 17 percent of the households (n = 157) had another adult who was currently working. These other household adults for whom wages and hours were reported (n = 137 with nonmissing wage and/or hours data) were more likely than respondents to be working 40 hours or more per week, and they were less likely to be earning minimum wage. Additional analysis (not presented) indicates that in both the respondent and other household member groups, those working more hours were also more likely to be earning higher wages. Thirty-three percent of respondents and 37.4 percent of

TABLE 3
Employment Hours and Wages of Respondents and Other Household Members Who Were Currently Employed or Recently Unemployed

	Respondent's Work Status		Other Household Member's Work Status	
Employment Hours and Wages	Currently Employed n = 313	Recently Unemployed n = 217	Currently Employed n = 137	Recently Unemployed n = 66
Reported hours of work				
Less than 21/week	24.7%	31.4%	9.3%	24.7%
21–39/week	38.4%	30.5%	28.5%	37.7%
40+/week	36.9%	38.1%	62.3%	37.7%
	$X^2 = 4.59$, df = 2, p = .101		$X^2 = 15.44$, df = 2, p = .000	
Reported hourly wage				
Less than $5.16	23.6%	32.7%	12.4%	31.8%
$5.16–$6.50	34.8%	35.9%	35.0%	25.8%
$6.51–$8.00	21.1%	16.1%	22.6%	25.8%
$8.01 or more	20.4%	15.2%	29.9%	16.7%
	$X^2 = 7.48$, df = 3, p = .058		$X^2 = 13.40$, df = 3, p = .004	

Note: Sample sizes vary from previous tables because of missing data.

other household members who were currently working 40 hours or more were also earning $8.01 or more per hour.

Barriers to Employment. Table 4 presents responses to a question on employment barriers that was asked of those who had been unemployed longer than 6 months. The data are presented for those households in which no other adult was employed and for those in which the respondent had been unemployed for 6 months or more, but with another employed adult in the household. Individuals were asked to indicate which of the listed items presented a barrier for them in obtaining employment. The longer-term unemployed respondents identified several barriers to their employment. The most prominent barrier for those with no other worker was health problems, reported by 29.1 percent. Transportation was the second most often cited barrier to employment for this group. For those households with another employed adult, the "barrier" listed most often was caring for preschool children (reported by 31.5 percent), and health problems was the second most often noted barrier (27.8 percent). There were also differences between the groups in the percentage who noted affordability of child care and having looked but unable to find a job. These differences in identified barriers are not surprising given that those with another worker in the household were more likely to be households with children (78 percent of households with another adult worker were households with children compared to 58 percent of households with no other adult worker). Only a very small percentage of the respondents in both groups stated that they did not want to work.

Hardships Experienced by Respondents. In addition to needing food assistance, many households experienced other problems, which we have labeled as *hardships*. These hardships clearly demonstrate the economic vulnerability of these households. Table 5 summarizes the responses from survey respondents about the range of hardships they had experienced during the 6 months immediately before the survey. Respondents were asked to check all that applied to them. These hardships seem to fall into three interacting categories: housing and family situation, loss of public benefits, and disruption in

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TABLE 4
Barriers to Employment among Longer-Term Unemployed Virginia Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Users

	Employment Status	
	Households with No Other Worker Employed	Households with Another Currently Employed Worker
Barrier to Employment	Respondent Unemployed over 6 Months n = 275	Respondent Unemployed over 6 Months n = 54
I have health problems	29.1%	27.8%
I don't have transportation	18.9%	14.8%
I take care of children who are not yet in school	12.7%	31.5%
I can't afford child care	10.9%	18.5%
I've looked but there are no jobs	14.2%	1.9%
I don't have the education or training	8.7%	9.3%
I don't want to work	2.9%	1.9%

TABLE 5
Hardships Experienced by Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Households in Previous 6 Months

Hardship Experienced	Percentage of Households That Experienced Each Hardship: Two Household Adults Currently Employed n = 70	One Household Adult Currently Employed n = 346	No Household Adult Employed, One Recently Unemployed n = 236	All Household Adults Unemployed More Than 6 Months n = 275
Housing/family situation				
Was homeless*	8.6%	10.7%	17.8%	9.8%
Had to move because couldn't pay rent**	7.1%	14.5%	21.2%	12.0%
Had to let others move in to help pay expenses	15.7%	9.5%	8.9%	8.0%
Was victim of domestic violence	2.9%	8.1%	8.1%	9.5%
Children had to spend time away from me or in foster care	4.3%	5.2%	5.9%	2.2%
Had to skip meals**	22.9%	39.6%	39.8%	28.0%
Loss of public benefits				
I lost my medicaid/health insurance	7.1%	12.1%	9.3%	8.0%
I lost my TANF benefits	10.4%	13.8%	16.1%	9.3%
I lost my food stamps	12.9%	15.0%	12.3%	11.3%
Disruption of utilities				
Phone service cut off*	18.6%	22.8%	19.1%	13.1%
Heat/electricity cut off	11.4%	11.8%	13.6%	12.4%

*$p < .05$ (chi-square statistic).
**$p < .01$ (chi-square statistic).

utilities. Because most of these hardships are likely to be related to the economic well-being of the household, we have presented the data by the number and recent employment status of earners in the household. Although percentages experiencing a particular hardship were significantly different across all the groups for only four of the 11 hardships, it appears that the recently unemployed were more likely than any of the other groups to have experienced hardships within the last 6 months. Compared to the other groups, they were more likely to have experienced homelessness, to have moved because they couldn't pay the rent, to have children who lived away from them, to have had to skip meals, to have lost their TANF, and to have had a disruption in their heat or electricity. Interestingly, in most instances, a smaller percentage of the longer-term unemployed experienced one of these hardships within the last 6 months than households with at least one current worker or households with a recently unemployed worker. When we examined the total number of hardships experienced across the four household groups (range 0–11), the longer-term unemployed respondents also had a somewhat lower average number of hardships (mean = 1.2, SD = 1.4) when compared to the group with one employed adult (mean = 1.6, SD = 1.7) and the recently unemployed (mean = 1.7, SD = 1.5). Households with two employed adults had a mean of 1.2 hardships (SD = 1.4).

To further examine the relationship between employment status and the hardships experienced by a household, we ran a regression analysis in which the number of hardships was the dependent variable. The model included household employment status variables (with the long-term unemployed being the omitted category) and household and respondent characteristics. Included in the household characteristic variables was the year of the survey (1998 versus 1999) and whether this was a food pantry respondent. These variables were included to control for potential unmeasured household differences between the two sample years and the sampling sites that may influence the hardships experienced.

The regression results (Table 6) show that net of potential differences in household and respondent characteristics, compared to the longer-term unemployed (the omitted category), having only

TABLE 6
Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Total Number of Hardships Experienced by Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Households in Previous 6 Months (N = 925)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
Variables in Equation	B	Std. Error	Beta
Employment Status[a]			
One worker	.38*	.13	.12
Two workers	.07	.21	.01
At least one recently unemployed worker	.45*	.13	.13
Number in Household	.03	.04	.04
Single-Parent Family	.44*	.12	.14
Number in Household Less Than 18	.05	.05	.05
Pantry Respondent	-.52*	.15	-.12
1998 Respondent	.40*	.10	.13
High School or More	.03	.10	.01
Race[b]			
African American	-.07	.11	-.03
Other	-.26	.16	-.06
Constant	1.16*	.19	
R^2 = .08			

[a]Compared to unemployed 6 months or more.
[b]Compared to white.
*Significant at $p < .01$.

one worker in the household is significantly related to experiencing a greater number hardships in the previous 6 months. The recently unemployed also experience a greater number of hardships than do the long-term unemployed. Although this is a somewhat surprising finding, it does not necessarily mean that the longer-term unemployed are better off economically; it may simply be an indication that their lives have stabilized. The recently unemployed, as well as the low-income employed, continue to experience numerous changes in their circumstances. Not surprisingly, single-parent households experience increased numbers of hardships. The only other significant predictors of the number of hardships experienced are the food assistance site and the year. Pantry respondents were less likely to experience hardships than soup kitchen respondents and 1998 respondents were more likely to experience hardships than 1999 respondents.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The majority of users of emergency food assistance programs in our sample have characteristics that do not bode well for their being able to earn high enough wages to all allow them to meet basic family needs in the long-term without additional supports. A large percentage have less than a high school education, many are single parents, most are women, and their wages when employed are very low. Even with full-time employment, the resulting wages appear to leave many families without adequate resources to cover the costs of food. Over one-half of our respondents (55 percent) had earned a high school education, yet we know that educational level is a particularly critical determinant of earnings potential. Being a woman compounds the problem, because even in times of low unemployment, the unemployment rate for women is significantly higher than for men (Segal, 1997), and when women are employed, their wages continue to lag behind those of men (Hartmann, Allen, and Owens, 1999). In addition, although only a small percentage of our respondents indicated that they had lost their TANF

benefits, we are likely to see an increase in this number as more recipients are affected by the welfare-to-work and time limit requirements of PRWORA.

But earnings and income provide only one measure of a household's economic well-being. Personal or household income has been the traditional indicator of economic well-being (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), but research has begun to examine other measures of well-being (Bauman, 1998; Meyers and Garfinkel, 1999). Although highly correlated, the income poverty measure may not capture an accurate picture of the economic well-being of certain groups, especially those working and living just above the poverty line. For example, low-wage earners whose households have incomes just above poverty may be worse off then some living in poverty. Working households can have high work-related expenditures, such as child care and transportation costs, thus reducing their earning power and placing them at risk of poor economic well-being (Bauman, 1998). Evidence is growing to support the use of hardship measures as a valid indicator of economic well-being (Bauman, 1998). To assess the hardship dimension, the Census Bureau added a supplement to its SIPP survey in October 1995 through January 1996. The hardship items included: inability to meet essential expenses, nonpayment of rent or mortgage, eviction, failure to pay utility bills, utilities being cut off, phone service disconnected, forgoing needed medical care, forgoing needed dental care, and not enough food to eat in the household (Bauman, 1998). Findings showed higher levels of hardships among households that receive public assistance, that lack health insurance, and that include children, noneldery, and African Americans (Bauman, 1998).

Another issue raised by the findings from our study is the low rate of participation in the Food Stamp Program. Fewer than one-third (32 percent) of the respondents in our sample were currently receiving food stamps. Although those not receiving food stamps may have been ineligible for the program, other reasons for nonparticipation are also likely. Studies on food stamp nonparticipation have concluded that lack of information about program rules and income limits, as well as the administrative complexity of the program in relation to the benefits derived, influence the likelihood that an eligible

individual will make application for FSP benefits (Daponte, Sanders, and Taylor, 1998; Eisinger, 1998; Zedlewski, 1999). Our study provides some indication that our respondents faced some of these barriers. In 1999, respondents in our study who reported losing FSP benefits in the 6 months immediately prior to the study (n = 82) were asked the primary reason that they stopped receiving food stamps. Over half indicated that they became employed or that their income improved (24.4 percent and 29.3 percent, respectively), and over 18 percent indicated they did not return for FSP recertification or felt that their benefits were too small to "put up with the hassle" of program participation. This may be an indication that many individuals are using food assistance services as an alternative to the challenges of FSP application and recertification requirements.

Increases in the use of "emergency" food assistance sites (Second Harvest, 1998), the persistence of food insecurity and hunger in the U.S. (Food Security Institute 1999), and the prospect that these programs may be supplementing the FSP for an increasing proportion of the poor and working poor in the near future raise serious concerns of social justice. Lipsky and Smith (1989) have argued that treating problems as emergencies appears, to the public, to be a less costly approach than establishing policies to guarantee adequate income and services for individuals. However, in addition to the fact that the increased reliance on these services is putting significant pressures on the voluntary food assistance system, questions are being raised about the equity of addressing these needs through an expansion of emergency programs (Whitaker, 1993). The network of charitable food assistance programs in the United States is large, but the privately operated programs are not available in all locations, and those that are available can only provide limited goods. Further, individuals and families relying on these programs to fully meet their food assistance needs or to supplement FSP benefits must have transportation to the food assistance sites and be available during the hours of site operation. There is also a concern that while voluntary food assistance serves a critical need, it also works to "reaffirm class-based stereotypes" in which the poor, many of whom are minority women and their children, are viewed as needing assistance

because of personal defects or temporary misfortunes that warrant only an emergency response from society (Curtis, 1997, p. 222).

Adequacy of food resources is an important issue in the era of welfare reform. Defining hunger as an individual, short-term problem that can be solved through the use of private voluntary services diverts our attention from the underlying problems of employment and wages, and government's role in assuring that families can meet their basic needs. Soup kitchens and food pantries are providing a critically needed service to the working poor and the chronically unemployed of Virginia and throughout the United States. However, these private voluntary efforts can only serve, at best, as a stopgap measure. Assuring a safety net for these most vulnerable citizens needs to be a matter addressed through appropriate public policies.

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